

North of the Accents

By John Whelan – Columbia, Maryland

North of the eastern Canadian Providences,
the Celtic lilt dissipates, disappearing into the big empty.

Above Churchill Falls, the mother tongue
meanders through spruce and aspen forest,
as softly as a foot falling into fresh snow.

These ancient dialects, shaped by barometric pressure
and arctic cold fronts,
constrict syllables to the sound of a branches bending.

North of the accents, words have utility.
Spoken not to pontificate or to linger frivolously on frozen ears,
but as a tool to turn a phrase or tighten up an expression
around the close confines of a fire.

Southern words, with their slow cadence and elongated vowel sounds,
don't survive up here, they harden and contract,
eventually snapping during the first hard freeze in August.

Wind, the eternal shape shifter, has the last word.
Whooshing the people's prayers over the snowy expanse and sea ice,
answering their invocations with thunderous roars and sustained howling.
Amidst the calamity, an Inuit child falls asleep
to a low whistling sound outside her window, a reply she finds comforting.